



The Literary Club of 18th-Century London

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We Bengalis think that no one can match us for our *addas*. If you were growing up in Dhaka in the 1950s or the 1960s and happened to be literary in your inclinations, chances are you would end up on some evenings in Old Dhaka's hotel-cum-restaurant Beauty Boarding. You would do so not mainly for the good food sold there at modest prices but chiefly because you intended to see and hear poet Shahid Quadri regaling everyone in a table that probably included budding poets such as Shamsur Rahman and Syed Shamsul Huq, a promising film maker like Abdul Jabbar Khan, or a gifted painter like Debdas Chakrabartee. Over seemingly endless cups of tea, Quadri and his fellow poets and artists and many other enchanted hangers on would be entertaining each other late into the evening. Everyone present would in all probability say to each other or to others later: "Was there anywhere

any *adda* as good as the one that took place in Beauty Boarding that evening?"

And, of course, Bengalis of Kolkata will claim that there was never ever any place for chatting and no *addas* held anywhere that have been able to match the ones at the city's College Street Coffee House. Who hasn't heard the song by Manna Dey that has immortalized the conversation and the characters there —poets, journalists, actors, artists—all engaged in intellectual chitchat over nonstop cups of coffee? And though the song laments the passing away of a generation, one can find Kolkata's Coffee House, like Dhaka's Beauty Boarding, still very busy and very full of *addas* even now.

But surely among the most famous *addas* of all times were the ones that took place in eighteenth century London's "The Club," aka "Literary Club." This was the archetypal club for glowing conversation conducted over good food, great coffee and suitably

stimulating drinks (this last bit is conjectural!). Without a doubt it is the most famous British literary club in history, and here outstanding intellectuals would engage in always entertaining and often scintillating conversation. Just consider the luminaries in attendance at the Club on a typical London evening. At the centre of the conversation would be the physically huge figure of Dr. Johnson—he of the towering intellect, he who was also known as "Dictionary Johnson" for his incredible feat of penning the first substantial dictionary of the English language almost single-handedly. Listening to him would be his devoted biographer, James Boswell, Sir Joshua Reynolds, the greatest painter of the period and the founder of the Club, Edmund Burke, the brilliant orator, passionate parliamentarian and indefatigable critic of the East India Company, Oliver Goldsmith,